

Literature or Indoctrination

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I. The Decision on Pornography

THE MARCH 1965 Supreme Court decisions upholding jail sentences for two notorious publishers of pornographic literature, Ralph Ginzburg and Edward Mishkin, shocked people who feel obliged to defend freedom of expression at any cost, and unpleasantly surprised those engaged in publishing pornography for profit. Although the decision was close (five to four), and although the dissenting justices were sharp in their criticism of it, it does show that America is still not quite ready to give absolute freedom of speech to absolutely everybody for absolutely any purpose whatsoever. Many people, and not only those elements of the "liberal" press which have added the protection of pornographers to their list of worthy causes, look on the decision as a step backwards. To them any limitation on the ideal of freedom of speech is a dangerous violation of a cherished liberty.

At this point those "liberals" who want to make freedom of speech absolute have to be reminded, as they so often like to remind conservatives in other connections, that no ideal of our democracy, whether it be the right to personal ownership of property, freedom of religion, or anything else, can be applied absolutely. Private rights to property are frequently infringed by eminent domain; freedom of worship does not permit a man to have several wives, even if his religion calls for it. And the Supreme Court has shown that for the time being at least freedom of speech is not absolute enough to protect blatant, out-and-out pornography. In an earlier decision, the Court had already ruled that in order to be suppressed, literature had to be "absolutely without redeeming social significance." That leaves a loophole through which all but the very worst products can crawl, but it does at least draw a line somewhere, as Ginzburg and Mishkin discovered to their sorrow. The most significant thing about

the decision is not that two pornographers have gone to jail, but the fact that it shows that many of us, including five Supreme Court justices, still recognize that literature does influence life, and that some limitations have to be preserved. A grisly example of the connection between pornography and hideous crimes was given by the recently-concluded "moor murders" trial in England. The two murderers had a collection of pornographic and sadistic literature.

II. *Pornography only an Aspect of the Problem*

ALTHOUGH THE moor murders cast a garish light on the problems connected with the influence of pornographic literature, they alone do not prove that it should be suppressed—any more than the assassination of President Kennedy proves that the purchase of firearms, or the holding of parades, should be prohibited. In fact, the increase in publication of pornography, the fact that it is becoming readily available everywhere, often at the corner drugstore, and to everyone, is distracting attention from the fact that it is not only utterly depraved publications which can be dangerous and corrupting. In a 1956 study, the distinguished Harvard sociologist Pitrim Sorokin maintained that slick and sophisticated magazines and books which exalt promiscuity and self-indulgence are a great deal more corrosive to values than outright pornography.¹ On the other hand, if present trends continue, the distinction between "literature" and pornography may become just about impossible to make. Even a serious, valuable, and highly moral book like Morris L. West's *The Devil's Advocate* includes some scenes which would have been considered obscene a few years ago. Perhaps they are vital to the structure of the book; perhaps, though, it is simply that the reading public has so come to ex-

pect this sort of thing that even West has to include a bit of it, notwithstanding the fact that it is more or less irrelevant to his main concern. It will be a sad day when a generous dose of licit and illicit, natural and unnatural sex is necessary for every work of literature, whatever its plot or purpose. Although the lines are blurring, for the moment it is still possible for most people to make a distinction in their thinking between real pornography, semi-pornographic "slick" magazines, and genuine literature. Sorokin has discussed the impact of the slick semi-pornography, and this is important. But equally, or perhaps more important, is what we can still call "genuine literature."

III. *Literature Dangerous?*

AS SOON AS one allows oneself to suggest that literature is or could be *dangerous*, a large number of one's listeners will flee wildly, uttering cries of horror and amazement. This reaction is not entirely unjustified, because such great harm has been done in other centuries and in other societies by measures taken to identify and prohibit "dangerous" publications, and a modest amount of harm has been done in our own country. It has to be admitted from the outset that freedom of speech is a vital freedom, and that any attempt at censorship, even the mildest, is fraught with dangers and easily open to abuse. The need is not for censorship, at least not for censorship over and above the irreducible minimum still preserved by the Supreme Court. In fact, the usual effect of censorship is to make the censored material more desired and more effective. This is certainly the case in the United States, where every attempt to censor a book results in a big increase in sales.

The problem lies rather in our approach to serious and semi-serious literature. A

boxer can take a heavy blow in the stomach if he is prepared for it, but the same blow when he is not expecting it could seriously injure him. The real difficulty and danger with contemporary literature lies less in the writers or in the content, but in the readers, and in the fact that they soak it up in such quantities and so uncritically. Even water becomes a problem if one drinks four quarts of it at once, and almost all modern literature is a bit stronger than water.

IV. *False Neutrality and Real Contents*

THERE WAS certainly a time when a moral or moralistic standard was all too readily and too unintelligently applied to all literature. Particularly for children and young people, a book had to have a moral, to be uplifting and edifying, or it could not be recommended. If a villain remained unpunished, if an immoral action was presented in a favorable light, the work would be criticized and kept out of reach. In this way some of the great classics of literature were kept away from young people, or else presented in bowdlerized versions. The foolishness of this type of behavior has been exposed too often to need repeating here. However, just because it is idiotic to claim that children's minds will be corrupted by reading original Shakespeare, we cannot assume that there is nothing that can or does corrupt the minds of children—and adults.

In most European countries, newspaper readers know that some papers are controlled by political parties, and that their reporting is not entirely objective. The reader who is interested in knowing the facts may take both the socialist and the conservative daily papers, knowing that even when editors and reporters have honest intentions, they do not always succeed in reporting the facts objectively. Ameri-

can newspaper readers, who are used to expecting a high standard of impartiality, are being forced to recognize that they do not always get it. This is not only true of newspaper reporting; almost every writer of any worth has an axe to grind. The better he is, the sharper the axe is—and the better he keeps it concealed in his writing. This is no disgrace to the writer, who would be worthless if he did not have some deep concerns and commitment, nor does it mean that one should not read, or benefit from, his works. It merely means this: one has to keep one's eyes open for the axe, and be aware of the fact that there is no such thing as *neutral* literature this side of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*—and probably they aren't neutral either. In addition to whatever entertainment or artistic value literature has, it always has a real content to communicate—a thing which is neither bad nor dangerous in itself, as long as one recognizes it and can evaluate it critically.

V. *Philosophical Propaganda*

EVERY YEAR a number of new novels and short stories appear, often published by religious publishing houses. Some of them are good, some are pretty bad, and most readers immediately recognize that they are religious propaganda. This is not necessarily a bad thing, in fact it can be rather a good thing—although often the edifying value of the work is lost as soon as it is recognized as propaganda. Unfortunately—perhaps because so many of us went to religious Sunday School, and so few to any philosophical or political Sunday School—most people are much better at recognizing religious propaganda than the other kind. Furthermore, when a work is produced by shall we say a really great Christian writer, such as C. S. Lewis or T. S. Eliot, there is usually someone to comment,

"Of course, you know he is an Anglican," or, "But of course he's very religious." The opposite comment is seldom made in sophisticated circles about a writer who is an atheist or a nihilist, although it is at least as relevant.

"There is more significant philosophy in the American novel than there is in the output of our philosophy departments." The man who wrote those words, Gustav E. Mueller, is himself a professor of philosophy, and so cannot be suspected of being opposed to the philosophy department *per se*.² In his article, Mueller has put his finger on what may turn out to have been the most important intellectual influence at work in mid-twentieth-century America: that our basic philosophy—not our academic theories, but our most fundamental approach to ultimate problems of life and meaning—is coming from literature. There is nothing wrong with this; everyone needs some philosophy, and most novelists and playwrights make better reading than most out-and-out philosophers. The only difficulty is this: if one does not recognize what one is getting, the effects may be rather serious.

Professor Mueller deals only with the novel and takes his analysis, with one exception, from literature of the period just before and including World War II. To carry his study up to the present date, and to include above all the modern American stage, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee, would only strengthen his case. He finds, in his incisive critique, that the vast body of the American novel since 1900, including such honored and honorable names as Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Sinclair Lewis, "revolt against all the major and official American traditions,"³ and specifically against Christianity (or religion of any kind), against capitalism and the free market economy, against egalitar-

ian democracy, and against the idealistic tension of freedom and personal responsibility.

With some exceptions (for example, Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*) religion is not usually attacked head-on, but merely ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. However, in the hands of a gifted writer, this tactic can be quite deadly. In its place we usually do not find an alternate system of values, but nihilism, disillusionment, and a repudiation of all ideals. In place of capitalism, we seldom find any real support for the radical alternative of communism—merely disillusionment with and contempt for the free economy, and the denial that it can ever be expected to produce happiness and justice. To egalitarian democracy some writers oppose an elitism; others are content just to portray the mass of the people as so corrupt and irresponsible that it is best for them—or at least serves them right—if they are ruled and directed by an elite, even if the elite itself is no more dedicated or honorable than that in Drury's *Advise and Consent*. To the creative tension between freedom and responsibility, which was so much on the minds of nineteenth-century writers, they oppose a Freudian determinism, or simply picture individuals as the football of tremendous forces over which they have no control. One of Jack Kerouac's characters cries, in a situation for which he is clearly responsible, "It's not my fault!" He denies his freedom and his responsibility, at least when called to account, if not when doing as he pleases, and this denial has become a battle-cry of our generation. Perhaps the Catholic Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation did have an unhealthy preoccupation with personal guilt, at least from time to time. The present trend, always to say, "It's not my fault," is even less healthy, and furthermore much of the time the statement is false.

VI. *No Immunity Claimed*

DEFENDERS OF the major traditions which Mueller says are under such heavy attack have no right to claim immunity from criticism. Often enough they are guilty of many of the charges which writers make. The charges are often distorted, frequently severely distorted, as for example in *Elmer Gantry*, but usually there is a grain of truth in them. After all, the authors are writing from life, even though sometimes they view it through rather peculiar spectacles. What is important is to recognize that these traditions are being fired upon, and also to look at the direction from which the fire is coming. When a man like James Baldwin attacks Christianity and all of Western civilization, it is important to recognize that he is probably being honest—the terrible picture he gives may be the way, to our shame, American civilization looks to him. But the fact that James Baldwin, speaking out of some extreme and torturing circumstances (for which he himself is not entirely without responsibility) sees our civilization one way does not mean that it is that way. He can be honest without being right. Nor, even if it were to some extent as Baldwin describes it, does it necessarily mean that we should give it up. What does he, or any other mild or severe critic, have to offer that is better?

We cannot claim immunity, and if we are honest and have any sense, we will recognize that we often have furnished the models for these scorching attacks on our traditions and civilization. Our critics demand that we face ourselves, and this is fair enough. In fact, we owe it to ourselves and our children. Socrates thought of self-knowledge as the major part of wisdom, and Calvin agreed that it was half of it. On the other hand, we can reasonably ask, and in fact must ask, what the alternatives

are. Mueller writes of the conclusions of most American novelists, that they say, in effect, "Every finite existence in the world is doomed to fall, to disintegrate, to die, and to be forgotten. If then, reality is identified with finite existences, if there is no genuine transcendence of any kind, then the result is a bitter and pointless rebellion—'no exit.' Finitism is nihilism. It prevails in twentieth-century American literature."⁴

It would be cowardly and unrealistic to claim immunity. But it is essential to recognize that there is a strong nihilistic current, and to attempt to avoid being submerged by it.

VII. *Realistic Countermeasures*

IT OUGHT TO be clear that neither censorship (which is not going to return in a strong form short of totalitarianism) nor moralistic rejection of current literature is the answer to the problem it poses. We would be missing out on a great deal of value, including the possibility of some bitter but helpful criticism, and in any case would be unable to isolate the rising generations from it. Among realistic countermeasures, the first is obviously to recognize what one is dealing with, namely, a very artistic kind of "propaganda" with one or more axes to grind. Again, to realize this is not to reject the men or their writings. It is simply to make the same kind of mental adjustment which is necessary when one reads a book on the papacy by a fervent Protestant, an awareness that one has to keep one's eyes open. The better the writer, the more honest he is, the more alert and critical one has to be. The hacks expose themselves pretty quickly, like the crude pornographers; it is the men who really have something to say with whom one has to be careful.

A second suggestion, particularly when confronted with the vast flood of literature which describes and denounces the banality and corruption of life in free America, is to compare it with some of the similar material published in countries where another system prevails. If one bears in mind that even reasonably mild critics of communism wind up with jail sentences, and then reads the works of a man like Jerzy Andrzejewski, which are permitted to be published in Poland, one can pretty quickly conclude that if capitalist morals are not lovely, the attempted alternatives are not so attractive either. A good dose of this may be a helpful antidote to some of our own writers, but of course it too offers nothing positive.

A third countermeasure is crucially necessary: careful and critical reading. One cannot just soak up modern literature—or, for that matter, modern movies and television—or one will wind up not merely soaked, but drowned. One has got to realize that there is only so much which can be ingested, much less digested, and see that reading too much is even worse than talking too much. This is not an appeal to close one's mind, but rather the contrary: to read as much, but only as much, as one can read critically, understand, and evaluate. The quantity of literary reading must be limited to manageable proportions, and what is read must be read critically—not only in terms of its artistic structure, but in terms of its philosophical

content. A messenger with no message is dull, and a book with no message is also dull. The books that are being read do have a message, or messages, and one has to look for it and respond to it.

To criticize, of course, one needs a positive commitment of one's own. We live in a free society, and there is no all-powerful church or totalitarian state to tell one what position one has to take. The responsibility for developing a personal value structure rests on the individual, and it is all the more serious precisely because no one else will do it for him. Except for those who are more than naturally stubborn, disinterested, or perhaps dull, it is impossible to confront the modern intellectual storms without a strong personal commitment to definite, positive values. It is the only way to stay afloat, and to keep one's wits. The alternative to a sharp, alert, and wellfounded critical approach to literature, the arts, and everything that is being produced by the mass-media of magazines, movies, and television, is to be taken over by their prevailing currents. And what that means, as Mueller so rightly says, "is a bitter and pointless rebellion—'no exit.'"

¹Pitrim Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution*, Boston (Porter Sargent), 1956.

²"Philosophy in the Twentieth-Century American Novel," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. XVI, No. 4, June, 1958, pp. 471-481.

³*Ibid.*, p. 473.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 471.